
Putting the Community Back into Corrections: A Partnership in Accountability

*by Jean M. Kuehl,
Assistant Director, Iowa Sixth
Judicial District Department of
Corrections, Cedar Rapids,
Iowa*

I was talking to a key legislator early this session about correctional issues, and he said, “Can I be honest with you? This isn’t what gets me elected.” Well, it certainly wasn’t the first time I’d heard that from a legislator, but this new legislative leader was about to learn how closely connected correctional issues were to what did get him elected. It was just the start of another long dialog.

I was reflecting back on that conversation on the drive home after speaking with a group of 35 community people last week. These citizens, like the legislator and other citizen groups I’d talked to before, believed that corrections is a revolving door with little hope to really change offender behavior. When they are asked a series of questions, it’s apparent that many of their beliefs are based on myths and misconceptions. It was the start of another long dialog.

This repeated dialog gives new meaning to the term “accountability.” During such discussions, we are able to reach consensus on what results community members want (fewer victims), on what the mission of corrections should be (doing something with offenders that makes them less likely to commit crime after their experience with us), and what the role of citizens is.

The role of citizens is always the most interesting part of the discussion. There is always a moment of complete clarity for me when I realize that unless we do involve citizens in corrections, we will always be marching uphill. When citizens get up close and personally involved, they begin to understand the reasons offenders get involved in crime and what kinds of actions are necessary to intervene to change their behavior. They also learn that there are no quick-fix solutions. They begin to see that they have a “stake” in whether correctional interventions produce successful results. Most importantly, they begin to understand that a partnership with the community is critically needed to produce successful results. Corrections can’t do it alone. We are partners in accountability.

I leave these dialogs with a hopeful attitude. Then reality sinks in. What about the other 129,975 citizens of this community? How do we get to them? How do we go beyond just talk? How do we create a system that has participation from victims and community members?

To reclaim corrections for those whom it is intended to serve, we have a leadership responsibility to figure out how to make the community an integral partner. However, we must be mindful to bring the rest of the “system” along at the same time. The strength of habit cannot be overestimated; people will go back

to the quick fix and lapse into hopelessness in no time if messages from different parts of the system are confusing.

Partnering with the Community: Developing a Strategic Plan

In Iowa's Sixth District, task forces and advisory boards are working on projects that affect community/restorative justice initiatives. In 1997, we expanded an advisory board into a Community and Restorative Justice Task Force to study related philosophies and tell us if we should incorporate them into our work. We worked to make this a diverse group that represented all segments of the community and criminal justice system. At the end of 1998, a strategic plan was developed to communicate and guide the implementation of community and restorative justice practices within the community.

Action groups were formed around each of the six strategies. Each action group caused more community members to be brought in to understand the work of community and restorative justice. Co-chairs of each group came from the overall task force. The accomplishments and resources noted below for each action group are meant to be illustrative examples. The partnership with the community continues to grow.

Community Education Action Group—The purpose of this action group is to develop awareness of community and restorative justice by creating and maintaining a strong communications campaign which will recognize achievement, identify areas of ongoing concern, and educate the community about the benefits of community and restorative justice for all citizens.

Accomplishments: The group makes frequent presentations to the community on community and restorative justice through videos, newspaper articles, and television.

Victim-Sensitive Practices Action Group—The purpose of this action group is to create community and system(s) understanding of victim issues so that action is taken to support and respond to victims and their needs. Its mission is "to create a seamless system of support and services to victims."

Accomplishments: The group created a Victim Advisory Board, which meets monthly. Victim involvement includes advising the criminal justice system on victim sensitive practices. They have created an educational series for victims on how the criminal justice system works; developed victim impact panels; sponsored training for the criminal justice system and community on victim needs; and raised funds to support victim needs. In addition, the local police department created a Victim Liaison position. The group is looking to involve offenders or offenders' family members on the board.

Members: Victims, victim advocates, and criminal justice system representatives (20 to 25 people involved).

Resources: Funds have been raised to reimburse victims' expenses for presenting on victim impact panels, and technical assistance supported training on restorative justice for victims and community agency partners. Criminal justice system and community agencies provided in-kind and fiscal support.

Profile: Community and Restorative Justice Task Force, Iowa Sixth Judicial District, Cedar Rapids, Iowa

Partner agencies: Iowa Sixth District Department of Correctional Services, local police departments, victims/victim advocacy groups, criminal justice system representatives, and the general community.

Purpose: Understanding that beliefs and principles underpin how we treat one another in any culture, partnerships have been developed to implement restorative justice principles and practices in the criminal justice system and community.

Launched: 1997

Vision statement: "Cedar Rapids is a safe and just community, where we actively care about each other and gladly assist in restoring community members who have been harmed. We promote justice for victims, public safety for the community, accountability and opportunity for change in the offender, and respectful treatment for all involved. In such a community, we have fewer victims."

Mission: "Community justice seeks to enhance community safety and well-being using a model of personal responsibility. Community justice creates an environment where victims are acknowledged and included; offenders are held accountable, and given the opportunity and encouragement to change; and the community is actively involved in the process."

Beliefs:

- ◆ The community owns the process of justice.
- ◆ A fundamental role of the community justice system is to define and produce positive results.
- ◆ Standards for acceptable behavior are agreed on and expected to be modeled by the whole community; not imposed by a part of the community on the rest of the community.
- ◆ When individuals violate the acceptable standards of behavior, they must be held accountable in ways that demonstrate respect and allow people to change; a community must build on all of its assets.
- ◆ Victims are at the center of the process of defining the harm done to them and play an active role in determining how their needs can best be met.
- ◆ Offenders are responsible to understand, acknowledge, and to the extent possible, repair the harm done to victims and their community.
- ◆ Keeping a balanced focus on victim, community, and offender deepens our understanding and commitment to justice.
- ◆ Understanding, respecting, and promoting racial and social diversity is our strength.
- ◆ Community partnerships must be developed and strengthened to foster understanding and accomplish our goals.

Community/Criminal Justice System Action Group—The purpose of this action group is to develop a community-driven process to work with the criminal justice system to implement community and restorative justice.

Accomplishments: Two Probation/Police/Neighborhood partnerships have been implemented in two different neighborhoods that are under-resourced.

Resources: In one neighborhood, the neighborhood association purchased a former crack house that was rehabbed with the support of offenders and community members.

Invest in Children Action Group—The purpose of this action group is to identify current efforts/collaborations that focus on children and coordinate linkages to teach children community and restorative justice skills.

Accomplishments: The group is working with the school system to incorporate restorative principles. They have held several training events targeting teachers, day care providers, and other professionals. A nationally known speaker at an “Invest in Children Rally” provided community-wide training on resiliency with the goal of getting parents and community members to volunteer to “do one thing” to support the healthy growth and development of children. There is a keen understanding that criminals don’t fall out of the sky at age 18 and community members can work to prevent crime. The group actively tracks and advertises these individual contributions.

Members: More than 80 community members and agencies are involved.

Resources: The group secured grants to sponsor the training, and the Area Education Agency offered financial support. Two community foundations and several businesses have provided in-kind and financial support.

Creating Community Action Group—The purpose of this action group is to promote the development of a safe and inclusive community to implement community and restorative justice concepts.

Accomplishments: This group created a vehicle to bring together diverse members of our community: “Dinner at Our House,” in which monthly community dinners are held in different locations. There have been 16 months of dinners. Seven people showed up at the first dinner and there were 91 at the last dinner. Attendance continues to grow.

Membership: A community steering team of 10 supports this effort. The team has also purposefully reached out to involve offenders.

Resources: All food has been donated. Volunteers cook and serve the food. The group recently received a donation of \$3,000 from a local church.

Offender Education/Accountability Action Group—The purpose of this action group is to develop a process to teach and hold offenders accountable to repair the harm done to their victims, the community, their families, and themselves.

Accomplishments: The group has held victim impact classes for offenders; implemented victim/offender mediation; carried out restorative community service projects; and organized group conferencing for families.

Membership: Community members and victims participate as Impact Panel members, mediators and assist with community service projects in a variety of ways, as well as becoming family partners for corrections-involved families. Offenders have become resources for other offenders.

Resources: Americorps/VISTA volunteers have helped develop projects. Byrne grants have supported the Family Group conferencing.

Lessons Learned

Beginning the process of partnering with the community can be a daunting task. Here are some of the lessons we've learned.

- ◆ Start wherever you can. Rome wasn't built in a day. Pick the low hanging fruit. What's doable? People will drop like flies if they don't see something tangible happening. Most grand plans I've seen are still sitting on the shelf gathering dust. And it's important to remember that most people are doing this on top of already full time jobs. Even the seemingly smallest efforts add up. Example: I started out simply saying I would do two speaking engagements a month on restorative justice. From day one, I've never had to seek these out; they have a way of finding me.
- ◆ Before you go talk to community members, spend time fleshing out the answer to "why care?" You need to define compelling reasons for why people who are already busy should do "one more thing."
- ◆ Look first for your allies. You need to build capacity to support this work. If you rely on too few people, you will burn them out. Talk's cheap and you have to prove yourself. Focusing on the naysayers will waste the time and energy you need for building the evidence that restorative justice does work.
- ◆ Focus on building trust and relationships. That is the key to building peaceful communities. The essence of this work is all about relationships. Build networks of support.
- ◆ Take time to develop principles on how you will work together and revisit them often to make sure you are grounded in restorative values. Be inclusive. Respect the culture of the groups you are inviting. Listen. Acknowledge and validate all ideas. The community should drive your strategic plan. Hand over power so that consensus is built. Focus on strengths.

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- ◆ Remember that dialog anchors beliefs. If not well anchored, you will drift. If they are not well grounded in a belief structure, people will give up at the first hurdle instead of persisting.
 - ◆ Be patient. Patience and persistence pay off. Everything takes longer than anticipated. Change takes time. Just when you think all is for naught, everything happens at once.
 - ◆ Understand that education is paramount. Education is reciprocal. Building alliances with stakeholders takes time, and new members are constantly being invited in who must be educated on the principles of restorative and community justice. Redesign your training handouts; they must be simple and understandable. This is a philosophy, not a program. Don't just talk theory; we have found that personal stories are the most powerful way of creating an understanding of the philosophy.
 - ◆ Practice what you preach. It is essential to model the principles of restorative justice every day and in every way with each interaction. Make sure your actions are consistent with your words.
 - ◆ Take risks. Mistakes will be made. Be honest about mistakes and learn from them. Repair the harm.
 - ◆ Have leaders who see the vision and know how to articulate it as well as to motivate and inspire others. It is also important to have people who know process, who can move the vision into action steps. "Vision without action is merely a dream."
 - ◆ Be constantly mindful of sustainability. Iowans are fond of the expression, "If you build it, they will come."
 - ◆ Celebrate and advertise success. Not everyone sees the success; those who do must articulate it for others.
 - ◆ Evaluate. Practitioners must sell their achievements. You need to evaluate to make sure that what you are doing is really restorative and not a wolf in sheep's clothing.

The Constant Challenges

Several aspects of our collaboration continue to pose challenges.

- ◆ Support for the process—Who provides the leadership? Facilitates? Takes minutes? Provides the resources needed to do the work? Corrections has traditionally been the glue holding everything together. Originally we thought we could turn our partnership efforts over to the community, but the response was that the mission of the partnership is grounded in the criminal

justice system. To pull out would be like pulling the rug out from under people. Leaders have emerged outside of corrections, but not without some purposeful recruiting. Resources are not a problem, as we seem to find them when we need them.

- ◆ Evaluation—We must “prove” this works. Doing this work is hard enough, much less finding the energy and resources to do evaluation. We have some baseline work, but we know we haven’t gone far enough in this area.
- ◆ Systemic integration—To succeed, each system must buy into the vision and build it into their strategic plan system-wide, across systems. To bring partners on board, we must court rather than confront them. Restorative and community justice philosophies work against our culture. They are not a quick and easy fix. Instead, making them work requires long-term thinking and empowerment—which means systems giving up power to be community-driven. Systems with their roots in paramilitary structures have a hard time making this transition within their own organization, much less asking the community to have a say.
- ◆ Momentum—How do we maintain the movement, the “steam”, the energy? The challenge to coalition building is maintaining vigor over time.
- ◆ Offender involvement—It is important to bring offenders actively into the work. We talked about the value and necessity of this the first time around; our second community partnership has incorporated this concept early on in their process.

The Hope

The process I have described has formed the template for future expansion into other communities. We began our second organized effort to engage the community in another county in 2000. The process has gone more quickly and achieved results earlier, because we have learned from our first experience. We sent a team from a third county in our jurisdiction to training in 2001, and they are now planning local implementation.

The process of putting the “community” back into community corrections is not a “done in a day” project, nor can it be done in a year. It is a journey one takes without a clear road map. We continue to figure it out as we go, with the active involvement of community members, victims, and offenders. It will take all of us to work together to do “what works.” It is when this vision is fully realized that legislators will, in fact, be held accountable by their electorate for providing the resources necessary for the result of correctional intervention to be fewer victims. That’s the hope that keeps us all hanging in there! That’s the way it must be done to maintain vitality and to truly create a partnership in accountability. ■

For more information:

Jean M. Kuehl
Assistant Director
Iowa Sixth Judicial District
Department of Correctional
Services
951 29th Avenue S.W.
Cedar Rapids, Iowa 52404
Telephone: 319-398-3675
Fax: 319-398-3684
E-mail:
jean.kuehl@doc.state.ia.us